

Briefing

Burma

Visit to Thai-Burmese Border

NOVEMBER 2006



Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Voice for the Voiceless

PO Box 99, New Malden, Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 020 8942 8810 **E:** admin@csw.org.uk **W:**

www.csw.org.uk

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 281836

© Christian Solidarity Worldwide. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, mechanical, recording and/or otherwise without the prior written permission of Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Visit to the Thai-Burmese Border

16 November – 2 December, 2006

“No place to hide, nothing to eat” –

The words of a Karen leader describing the current situation for
Internally Displaced People in Karen State, Burma

1. Executive Summary	2
2. Purposes of Visit	3
3. Personnel	3
4. Itinerary.....	3
5. Political Situation.....	4
6. Internally Displaced People	4
7. Refugees.....	10
8. Political Prisoners	12
9. Conclusions and Recommendations	14

I. Executive Summary

Burma's military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), continues to perpetrate widespread, systematic gross violations of human rights against its own people. At the beginning of 2006, the SPDC launched a major offensive against the Karen ethnic group. This offensive, which has targeted civilians, including women and children, is described by almost all analysts as the worst operation the military has carried out in Karen State since 1997. This year alone, over 25,000 Karen civilians have been displaced, and it is estimated that at least 400 villages have been affected, either totally or partially destroyed or otherwise abandoned. At the same time, violations continue to be carried out against the Karenni, the Shan and other ethnic groups, and the regime has launched a crackdown on the democracy movement, leading to the arrest of several prominent dissidents.

In a two-week visit to the Thai-Burmese border, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), in partnership with the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) and Support for the Oppressed Peoples of Burma, visited Internally Displaced People (IDPs) inside Karen and Shan States, including IDPs who have fled the recent offensive in Karen State. CSW obtained further evidence of the continuing human rights violations, particularly forced labour, torture and the destruction of villages, crops and livestock.

CSW calls on the international community to take immediate, meaningful action to bring about the restoration of democracy and respect for human rights in Burma. CSW urges the United Kingdom to provide urgently-needed humanitarian assistance to the IDPs through cross-border relief teams, and to provide support to indigenous pro-democracy

and human rights initiatives. Furthermore, we urge the European Union to strengthen the EU Common Position and to declare unequivocal support for a resolution on Burma at the UN Security Council. We also urge UN Security Council members to support a resolution on Burma, requiring the SPDC to release all political prisoners, provide unhindered access to all parts of the country for humanitarian organisations, and engage in tripartite dialogue with the National League for Democracy and the ethnic nationalities.

2. Purposes of Visit

- a) To obtain up-to-date information on the situation in Burma, particularly the offensive in Karen State;
- b) To establish closer relations with the Shan people and obtain information about the situation of IDPs in Shan State;
- c) To assess existing projects supported by CSW and consider future needs;
- d) To show solidarity with the oppressed and persecuted people of Burma.

3. Personnel

The delegation included Baroness Cox, a member of the British House of Lords, Dr Martin Panter, former International President of CSW, Benedict Rogers, Advocacy Officer for South Asia at CSW-UK, Anthony Peel FRCS, a consultant surgeon, and other representatives of CSW UK, CSW Australia, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) and Support for the Oppressed People of Burma.

4. Itinerary

The delegation visited Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Mae Sariang and Mae Sot and had meetings with organisations on the border engaged in humanitarian relief, health care, education and advocacy, including the Free Burma Rangers, Partners Relief and Development, the Burma Relief Centre, the Shan Women's Action Network, the Chin Human Rights Organisation, the Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT) and the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP). The delegation also met leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU), including the General Secretary Padoh Mahn Sha and the Joint General Secretary-I, Padoh Htoo Htoo Lay. In Bangkok, the delegation met the British Ambassador to Thailand, the Czech Ambassador to Thailand, Burma and Laos, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Alternative ASEAN Network (ALTSEAN) and the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) in Bangkok.

5. Political Situation

The SPDC continues to perpetrate gross violations of human rights, and has increased its efforts to suppress the ethnic nationalities and the democracy movement in 2006. Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, and the SPDC has been carrying out a major offensive in Karen State, targeting civilians, including women and children, in what many describe as the worst offensive against the Karen since 1997.

In September, the issue of Burma was formally raised at the UN Security Council for the first time, and the US intends to propose a resolution on Burma. The involvement of the UNSC has resulted in two visits in 2006 by UN Under-Secretary General Ibrahim Gambari. In his second visit, in November 2006, Mr Gambari met Senior General Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi, but there has been no tangible progress made as a result.

In October the SPDC reconvened the National Convention, to draft a new constitution for the country. It is believed that this will be the final session of the National Convention, a process which is widely regarded as a rubber-stamp for the regime's agenda. The delegates are mostly hand-picked by the regime, and there is no mechanism within the National Convention to present alternative drafts or to amend the regime's proposed constitution.

In November, the SPDC ordered the closure of the five field offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The SPDC also announced that the ICRC's access to prisons, which have been suspended since December 2005, would not be resumed.

6. Internally Displaced People

At least 500,000 people – and perhaps over one million – are internally displaced in eastern Burma. Since 1996, according to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), at least 3,077 separate incidents of village destruction, relocation or abandonment have been documented. In the past year alone, at least 82,000 people have been forced to leave their homes “as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict and human rights abuses,” according to the TBBC's 2006 Survey on *Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma*¹. The number of IDPs in each ethnic state and two divisions in eastern Burma is as follows:

- Shan State – 175,600
- Karen State – 99,300
- Karenni State – 79,300
- Mon State – 41,800
- Tenasserim division – 80,200
- Eastern Pegu division – 23,800²

¹ TBBC, *Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma*, 2006 Survey, p.2-3

² Ibid., p.23

According to one source, the SPDC troop numbers in Karen State are the highest since January 1995, when the SPDC attacked and captured the KNU Headquarters at Manerplaw. The offensive, which has continued through the rainy season, and has targeted civilians, primarily affects four districts in northern Karen State – Toungoo, Papun, Nyaunglebin and Thaton districts. It was reported to CSW that eight Burma Army divisions have entered these districts. Troops from over 50 battalions are in operation in northern Karen State. At least 25,000 civilians have been displaced this year alone as a result, and it is estimated that as many as 100 villages have been destroyed. According to the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), as many as 400 villages have been “affected” by the offensive, either partially or totally destroyed. Only a few thousand people have so far succeeded in reaching the Thai-Burmese border, while most are still in hiding in the jungle. The Burma Army has been looting and burning villages, and planting landmines around villages. The movement of villagers is severely restricted – this affects their food supplies, as it is now harvest time but they are unable to harvest their crops and so plantations are ruined. The SPDC has set up three relocation sites, or “concentration camps” as one source described them: Bu Hsa Khi, Naw Soe and Pa Hta. At least 4,000-5,000 people have been forced to move to these relocation camps under SPDC control, where they are used for forced labour. At least 1,000 every month are used for forced labour, including women, children and elderly people. No food, education or health care facilities are provided in the relocation sites. Many escape in order to find food, while those who remain have to try to find food by themselves. The SPDC has also reportedly been forcing Burmans into villages in northern Karen State, such as Bu Sa Khi and Mo So. From 5-10 October, the SPDC used 5,000 prisoners as porters. When they grew tired and were unable to carry military supplies any more, the SPDC killed 50 of them. According to one KNU leader, the SPDC’s presence is “worse” than the Japanese occupation in the Second World War.

There is an urgent need for humanitarian relief. Eastern Burma faces a health care crisis equal to some countries in Africa, according to a report, *Chronic Emergency: Health & Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, published in September 2006 by the Backpack Health Worker Team. While some countries do provide funding for cross-border relief to the IDPs, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) does not. DFID currently has an annual budget of £8 million for Burma, including the provision of £1.8 million over three years for aid to the refugees in Thailand through the TBBC. Funding to the TBBC from DFID is strictly restricted for use in the refugee camps in Thailand. In 2006, DFID has been carrying out a review of its Burma aid policy, including assessing the question of cross-border aid to the IDPs, but the completion of the review has been delayed and the results are not yet known.

CSW visited IDP sites inside Shan State and Karen State, and interviewed several IDPs who gave evidence of human rights violations.

Visit to an IDP camp inside Shan State

We visited an IDP camp in Shan State which currently has a population of over 2,700. The camp was established in 2001. We visited the clinic and school, and interviewed

IDPs. The school, which provides education for children up to the age of 13, has 280 children. The local commander of the Shan State Army (SSA) South told us: "We are so happy and grateful for your visit and for what you are trying to do for us. It is good to know that our situation is not forgotten, that people around the world know what is happening to us. It gives us hope. We have been fighting for freedom since the colonial times. Our objective is freedom and human rights for our people. We need your support and help." According to the SSA-South commander, the Burma Army's current troop presence in eastern Shan State alone totals four artillery battalions, and three Light Infantry Battalions. One battalion amounts to 250-350 soldiers.

We interviewed several IDPs in the Shan camp. For security reasons we have not used the names of the individuals or their villages.

Mr. S, aged 74, Buddhist, Shan, from a village in eastern Shan State

Mr S fled his home village with his family in 2002. He has a wife, two daughters and three grandchildren. He fled because SPDC troops came to his village several times and each time, the soldiers stole all the food supplies and used villagers for forced labour. He had to do forced labour, carrying 20-30 kg of ammunition and equipment for the troops, walking between four and five hours a day, and he was therefore unable to cultivate his rice farm. People were beaten if they refused to do forced labour. The period of forced labour varied – sometimes just two days, sometimes five days, and sometimes up to a month. "I am here as an IDP. I have no job. I used to be a rice farmer. Now I have no land anymore. I want to go back to my home and live in my own place."

Mr. J, aged 64, Christian, Lahu, from a village in eastern Shan State

Mr J fled his village in April 2004 with his wife, daughter, son-in-law and grandchild but his 25 year-old son was separated from the rest of the family as they were escaping and he does not know where he is. They escaped after the SPDC looted and burned down the village and beat him. The SPDC troops did this because before they came to the village, Mr J had ordered all the young girls to hide in the jungle, to avoid being raped by the soldiers.

Mr. L, aged 60, Buddhist, Shan, from a village in eastern Shan State

Mr L arrived in the IDP camp in August 2006, with his wife and seven children. They fled because SPDC troops had arrived in his village, and beaten villagers. The SPDC asked the villagers where the "insurgents" were, why they were feeding them and where they were going. The villagers said they did not know, and so the SPDC arrested and jailed the village headman. They also arrested eight villagers and jailed them in Kengtung. Many villagers were beaten with sticks, and the SPDC stole pigs, chickens and other livestock. Some were taken for forced labour, and three people were tied together to stop them running away. Those who collapsed from exhaustion while portering for the military were beaten and left by the side of the road. Women were also taken for forced labour, and raped. In March 2006, a 17 year-old woman was gang-raped by three soldiers, ten days after giving birth.

Mr. S, age 47, Buddhist, from a village in eastern Shan State

Mr S arrived in 2003, with his wife and two children. He had been the head of his village. The SPDC occupied his village and he was arrested by Commander Aeyheo of Battalion 221. He was held in captivity for eight days and severely tortured: his head was wrapped in a wet cloth and a plastic bag was pulled over his head and tied; he was unable to breathe and lost consciousness. He awoke with water being thrown over him and pain in his back, with subsequent bruising appearing, and he therefore concluded that he was either beaten or stamped on. He was handcuffed to a guard at all times. He escaped when his own guard fell asleep and the other guard went to the toilet, so he quickly pulled his hand out of the handcuff, severely lacerating it – but managed to escape. He spent ten days alone in the jungle. He eventually came to the camp where he was joined by his brother and the rest of his family. In his village, the SPDC took his cow and his buffalo and he saw them shoot an 18 year-old girl dead. All the houses in his village were burnt.

Mr L, aged 42, Buddhist, from a village in eastern Shan State

He was the head of his village, and is married with five children. He was captured by Battalion 717 and for many months was made to undertake forced labour, carrying either rice or ammunition of 50 kg, often for a week at a time. He was also forced to grow opium and had to give the entire crop to the soldiers. He could not tolerate this situation and therefore left with his family, hiding by day and walking by night. As far as he knows, the situation is still the same in his village: they have to grow opium for the SPDC.

Mr LH, aged 47, Buddhist, from a village in eastern Shan State

He is a farmer, with nine children and two grandchildren. In 2001, SPDC soldiers of Battalion 359 were billeted in the village. Some months later, the United Wa State Army arrived and, after a fierce argument, the SPDC Commander confiscated his house and his fields, giving them to the Wa. There were originally 100 houses in the village; there are now approximately 300 houses, but no Shan people remain. He fled with eight other families because they could not survive. They are happy in the camp because his children receive a good education and, unlike himself, they can read and write.

Interviews with orphan boys

The school started in 2001, and the orphanage opened in 2004. The orphanage has 83 children – 50% of whom have no parents, while the other 50% have one parent still alive. There are 54 boys and 29 girls. There is a need for blankets and bed-sheets, as it is very cold at night.

We spoke to three children, who briefly told us their stories. For security reasons we have not named them:

- I. A 9 year-old boy – SPDC troops arrested his mother, and he fled to the IDP camp in 2002 with his father and brother. His father died in 2004.

2. *An 11 year-old boy* – SPDC troops beat his father dead, and he fled with other villagers to the IDP camp in 2003. While escaping, he was separated from his mother and does not know where she is.
3. *An 11 year-old boy* – SPDC troops captured his father, and he escaped with his mother in 2001. She left him in the IDP camp while she went to find work.

We asked the children if they had a message for children in other countries. One of them said: “We want people to be happy, and to do well in school. Try hard for education.”

Karen IDP Camp

We visited a new Karen IDP camp on the banks of the Salween River, which is receiving hundreds of new arrivals every week as a result of the continuing offensive in Karen State. During our visit, we were told that the camp contained 2,060 people, but the number is continuously rising. At least 1,600 are from Toungoo district and 400 from Mon Township in Nyaunglebin district. 68 people had arrived the day we were there, and a further 200-300 were expected to come in the following few days. In the next month the number is expected to rise to 3000, with new arrivals from Kyaunging township. The camp is surrounded by three SPDC outposts, only two hours' walk away. The clinic is running desperately short of medicines, and has ten medical staff who are all unpaid. It is estimated to cost 20-30,000 Baht a month for medicines, and Support for the Oppressed People of Burma responded during the visit by providing funding for the coming three months, and pledging funding for a year. Many IDPs arrive having had to survive in the jungle for several days or weeks with little or no food before arriving in the camp.

The SPDC has reportedly sent 13 battalions, amounting to 2,000-3,000 soldiers, to block people who are trying to escape to the border. People are not allowed to return to their villages, and so if caught they are forced to move to relocation camps.

We interviewed several new arrivals. For security reasons we have not used place names or the names of people:

Mr G, aged 35, Christian

Mr G walked for one month to get to the IDP camp, with his children and wife, and survived by eating grass on the way. He arrived in the camp the day we were there. They fled because the SPDC had attacked the village, burned houses and stolen pigs and other livestock. The SPDC laid landmines around the village, shot five people, and took several people for forced labour. When the villagers fled, several elderly people stayed behind.

Mr S, aged 46, from Mon Township

Mr S arrived in the camp on 15 November after walking for 20 days. The conditions were terrible, as it was rainy season – “it was raining, we had no food, no shelter, no medicines, and people got sick, especially the children,” he said. He has six children, but

one child died as a result of an SPDC landmine, at the end of October. They fled because the SPDC destroyed crops, killed people, shot people in the jungles, burned houses and killed chickens, pigs and other livestock. Five people were killed by the SPDC. "When the SPDC sees people, they don't arrest them anymore. They shoot. They kill even children and babies," he said. Everybody fled the village, but 20 families went to an SPDC-controlled relocation camp. Only seven were able to flee to the IDP camp. In their journey to the IDP camp, they had to cross a main road between two SPDC outposts, so they had to wait a few days until they could cross safely.

Mr K, aged 35, Buddhist, from Mon Township

Mr K fled with his wife and three children – a daughter aged 20, a daughter aged 18 and a son aged 13. In 1991, he had been arrested by the SPDC and accused of being a KNU spy. He was imprisoned for three years, firstly in Kyaunging Prison and then in Toungoo Prison, and tortured and beaten severely. His hands were tied behind his back, and a plastic bag put over his head. Water was then poured over his head, and red ants were poured all over his body. He was forced to stand for a whole day with red ants all over him. He was tortured with electric shocks, and beaten with a big stick. As a result of the beating he lost his left eye. One year after his release, he was re-arrested, but he escaped. In July 2006, he fled his village due to the SPDC offensive in the area, and walked for 12 days to reach the IDP camp. 13 SPDC battalions, with about 1000 soldiers, occupy the area in which he lived. "They come hunting people. Whatever they see in the jungle, they steal, burn and destroy. They steal pots, clothes, everything from people's homes. I dare not return to my village. There is no hope, no place for me for the future," he said.

Ms N, aged 40, a Christian woman from a village in KNLA Brigade 3 area

She arrived in the camp the day we met her, having traveled with her family of six for three weeks, leaving her village because the SPDC soldiers burnt her house and she could not support her family. Her husband was a member of the KNLA and was shot dead by SPDC while hunting in the jungle four years ago. She knows that SPDC soldiers beat men in the village and took chickens and rice; they also planted landmines.

Ms P, a 35-year old Christian woman

She arrived on 21 November, having been walking for three weeks with her husband and seven children. They joined another group of about 60 people, all of whom had been forced out of their village by SPDC who burnt their homes. While in the jungle they ate roots, which they made into a porridge. Two of the children died of fever and a young mother miscarried and died of haemorrhage.

Mr PG, a 46-year-old Christian man, a teacher and a farmer from a village in Mon township

He had been in the camp for a week before we met him. On 10 October, SPDC Battalion 241, commanded by Tey Kyaw Soe, attacked his village with approximately 77 soldiers. Troops from two other battalions – 242 and 323 – also entered the village. They planted landmines in the fields surrounding the village. These troops are commanded by General That U Mg and Military Operations Command (MOC) 16. Mr PG and his family of seven children fled from his village before the SPDC soldiers arrived

but he knows that some of his family were killed by landmines. The rest of the family walked for eight days living on roots which they made into porridge. The previous year, a neighbouring village in Mon District, Kyaung Pha, was invaded by SPDC troops, who arrested some villagers, beat men, conscripted some for forced labour, raped young girls, gouged out the eyes of some villagers and slit the throats of others.

Mr. K, aged 46, a Christian, from a village Mon township

He walked for seven days in the jungle with his wife, a son of 10 years, together with eight other families. SPDC soldiers formed a base in his village; they burnt his home and planted landmines. Some villagers succeeded in escaping, but one was shot. During their walk through the jungle, they received food from the KNLA.

Ms H, aged 25, Buddhist, Burman, from a village in Mon township

She arrived in the camp a week before we met her, having spent 15 days in the jungle. Her husband was shot by the SPDC as they tried to escape. She arrived with her mother and three-year-old child, together with 47 other villagers. She witnessed the SPDC soldiers arresting men and women for forced labour; some were beaten and shot dead. During the time in the jungle, she received food and protection from the KNLA.

7. Refugees

There are currently an estimated 160,000 refugees in camps in Thailand. In 2006, the UNHCR began a major programme of resettlement of refugees to third countries. It is expected that up to 20,000 could be resettled in the coming year. Ten countries are currently accepting refugees under the UNHCR resettlement programme, including the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Finland and Canada. In the past two years the UK has accepted only 60, while the US has accepted 8,000.

While resettlement offers refugees opportunities for education and employment that they would not otherwise have in the camps, there are concerns about the effect of resettlement on those remaining. Many of the refugees applying for resettlement are those with key skills, and so there is a risk that the pool of skilled workers in the camps – teachers, medics and community leaders – will be depleted.

Although the long-term aim of the Thai Government is to close the camps, it is very unlikely that this will happen in the immediate or medium term. Indeed, with the current offensive in Karen State, it is possible that the 20,000 refugees who are resettled may be replaced with thousands of new arrivals.

Interview with Karen refugees

Mr. X fled Burma in 2003, after the SPDC began work constructing a dam near his village in Karen State, and demanded forced labour contributions. He had suffered a hernia at the age of nine, which had never been properly treated, and so it was very difficult for him to carry heavy things. When he told the SPDC he could not work as a porter, the soldiers beat him unconscious.

In 2002, teachers at his school asked the students to go and welcome the SPDC soldiers who were returning from the front-line. That particular day, he was feeling sick and had a headache, so he applied for permission to be exempt. However, two days later, at school, his Burmese teachers accused him of not wanting to welcome the SPDC soldiers and so forced him to do more forced labour, which exacerbated his hernia condition.

His parents sent him to hospital for an emergency operation, but it was badly done due to a lack of specialists. The operation had cost his parents a lot of money, and so they were unable to support his education. He wanted to find a way to continue to study, and started listening to radio broadcasts from BBC Burmese Service and Voice of America. The authorities, however, found out about this and came and confiscated the radio. He then started to explain to other villagers what he had learned from the radio about democracy, but the SPDC found out what he was doing. They confiscated his identity card, and a few days later he learned that they were coming to arrest him. He escaped, and walked for three days before reaching the refugee camp on the Thai border.

Mr W, a Baptist Christian, aged 42, from Nyaunglebin district

He arrived with his wife and six children in the refugee camp eight months ago. He was a rice farmer. In February, 2006 SPDC troops came and destroyed all his crops, accusing him of supporting the KNU. He fled with his family, but the SPDC caught his wife and took her away back to a military barracks in the village. She was arrested, her hands were tied tightly behind her back and she was then chained, in a standing position, to a wooden post. For two days she was repeatedly hit about the head and body, with rifle butts, bamboo poles and fists. She was deprived of sleep, food and water for two days. She was interrogated intermittently the entire time, always by men. There were no female guards present at any stage of her three-day incarceration. She said that she was very frightened and thought she might be killed. On the third day she was released quite unexpectedly and told to find her husband so that he might be interrogated. They did not go back to the local SPDC barracks but fled with their children that night, with the help of relatives. There was no food or medicine in their village - the only supplies came either from the KNU or the Free Burma Rangers. If anyone was very sick, they would have to travel one hour by car or walk four or five hours to the nearest clinic, where they had to pay for everything. Most people who were sick or injured in their village dealt with it themselves or had help from relatives of friends, or just died in the village. The children all said they were happy to be in Thailand, as they could now go to school. There were no schools of any kind in their village. They said they spent the days just 'playing' or helping their parents in the fields. Both husband and wife said they did not hate the Burmese, but were frightened of them and would only return home once the security situation improves.

Mr R, aged 38, a Baptist Christian from Nyaunglebin district

He arrived in the camp with the other family, from the same village. In late January/early February this year, he had been out near his village looking for firewood. Some SPDC troops approached him and knocked him unconscious with one of their rifle butts. When he came round an hour or so later he was in jail, and remained there for seven

days. The village elder was forced to pay 130,000 Kyats (approximately £6) for his release. He hired a car and took his eight children and wife and drove to the (relative) safety of KNU-controlled 7th brigade area. They then abandoned the car and travelled the remaining distance on foot to the Thai border. It took them three and a half days to reach the border.

8. Political Prisoners

It is estimated that almost 1,200 prisoners of conscience are in jail in Burma today. Since 1988, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPPB), 131 political prisoners have died in prison, due to either torture or the deprivation of medical treatment for diseases contracted as a result of poor prison conditions. In the past two years, the rate at which political prisoners have been dying behind bars has steadily increased. Two political prisoners died in October 2006 as a result of medical neglect.

Interview with former political prisoner Khun Saing, aged 54

CSW interviewed one former political prisoner, Khun Saing, who had contracted tuberculosis in prison and had fought for medical treatment.

Khun Saing served a total of 13 years in prison. He was sentenced three times – in 1976, 1989 and 1998. He was released from his third sentence in 2004, after serving seven years in prison for helping to write a history of Burma's student movement from 1920-1988. He had helped compile the information for the three-volume publication. He fled to the Thai-Burmese border in April 2006 after attending the funeral of Ko Thet Naing Oo, who was murdered by pro-SPDC thugs.

Khun Saing had been a medical student, but at the age of 22 he participated in a student demonstration, and was sentenced to seven years in prison. He served two years, and was then released. However, he was forbidden to resume his medical studies, and worked instead as a gardener.

He staged hunger strikes on three occasions while in prison, and was put in solitary confinement for his entire sentence. The size of the cell varied – sometimes he was in an 8ft by 12ft cell, which he said is “standard size”, sometimes in 6ft by 8ft cells and sometimes in 10ft by 8ft cells. He was tortured regularly, on one occasion for two days continuously. Torture included beatings and denial of food or water. Sometimes he was so thirsty he had to drink the water from the toilet. When he used the toilet, he was prohibited from closing the door. He learned English by reading books provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who from 1999-2004 were able to deliver books to prisons. Although he is a Buddhist, he read the Bible twice, in English. He confirmed that the SPDC has an anti-Christian agenda. “The mindset of this regime is that it dislikes other religions – Christians and Muslims.”

During his third sentence, Khun Saing contracted tuberculosis in prison, but had to struggle to receive medical treatment. In Shwe Bo Prison, near Mandalay, where he was held, there was no doctor, only a prison warden who had three months' medical training. He had to wait four months before he was able to receive medical treatment for tuberculosis. He succeeded in his fight for medical treatment only through his own persistence, and with the help of Amnesty International, who had taken up his case. Initially, he was allowed to visit the local hospital, but the doctor refused to see him. "I was in ankle chains and in a prison suit, and so she thought I was a criminal," he recalls. However, he had an X-ray, and afterwards the doctor said that the X-ray results showed his health was good. He pointed out, from his own medical knowledge, that there was a clear "shadowy ring" showing a tuberculosis cavity on the middle lobe of his lung. There were no radiologists in Shwe Bo, so he bribed the prison staff to send the X-ray film to Mandalay for examination. The result came back: a clear case of tuberculosis. He then had to fight for proper treatment, and was put on a regime of four drugs for eight months – the standard treatment for tuberculosis.

In October 2006, Thet Win Aung, who had been sentenced to 62 years in jail, died in prison at the age of 34. He had been sentenced in 1998 at the age of 26, for participating in pro-democracy activities. In prison he was outspoken in defence of prisoners' rights, and so he was sent to Kham Ti prison near the Chindwin River in western Burma, an area rife with cerebral malaria. He was then transferred to Mandalay, but his health deteriorated and he developed mental illness. He received no treatment, and died.

The SPDC sometimes plants drugs on political activists in order to convict them on criminal rather than political activities. One prisoner, a former Chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in Shwe Bo, was jailed for seven years in 1998 for possessing a type of cough medicine which contains codeine derivatives. His wife had used it before she died, and he did not know he had it, but the police found it when they raided his house.

The murder of Ko Thet Naing Oo in March this year shocked everyone. A former political prisoner who had served eight years of a 10 year sentence, he was working as a motorcar sales broker. He was, according to Khun Saing, respected in his neighbourhood in Rangoon. However, the local authorities formed a "security militia" after recruiting members of the local police, fire brigade and gangs of thugs, in order to obtain information about the activities of dissidents. One evening, Ko Thet Naing Oo and two colleagues were returning home. The security militia accused the three men of urinating in public, which is illegal in Burma, and started to beat them up. The three men fought back to defend themselves, and the militia responded with iron rods, big sticks and machetes. Finally, they crushed Ko Thet Naing Oo's head with a big stone. They took him to a trishaw and ordered the driver to take him to hospital, but he died in hospital.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The political and humanitarian situation in Burma continues to deteriorate rapidly. The SPDC is perpetrating gross violations of human rights which amount to crimes against humanity and attempted genocide. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians among the Karen, Karenni and Shan have been forced to flee their villages, or face forced labour, rape, forced relocation, the use of human minesweepers, torture and death. Thousands are displaced in temporary shelters, or are on the run in the jungle, without adequate food, medicine or shelter.

In light of the humanitarian crisis in Burma, we urge the international community, including Her Majesty's Government and the European Union, to take the following measures:

1. To provide financial support to emergency relief teams working cross-border reaching the IDPs within Burma with life-saving medical and food supplies;
2. To work to secure a resolution on Burma at the UN Security Council;
3. To strengthen the EU Common Position on Burma, and in particular to introduce sanctions on investment in the oil, gas, timber and gem sectors in Burma.

Furthermore, we urge Her Majesty's Government to introduce an investment ban for companies using British-dependent territories to invest in Burma.

CSW urges the SPDC:

1. To cease its offensive against the Karen and other ethnic nationalities, and declare a nationwide ceasefire;
2. To cease the gross violation of human rights, including the forced conscription of child soldiers, the use of rape, the use of forced labour, the forced relocation of villages, torture, and the use of human minesweepers;
3. To release all political prisoners;
4. To provide proper medical treatment for political prisoners;
5. To open all areas of the country, including prisons and ethnic states, to unhindered access for humanitarian organisations;
6. To enter into meaningful tripartite dialogue with the National League for Democracy and the ethnic nationalities.

The Karen, Karenni and Shan, along with all the people of Burma, have been suffering severe human rights violations and a humanitarian crisis for decades. For too long the world has stood idly by. It is time now for the international community to take action to provide humanitarian assistance to those most vulnerable, who can only be reached by relief teams working across Burma's borders, and to increase pressure on Burma's regime to cease its policies of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and attempted genocide.

For further information, please contact Benedict Rogers, Advocacy Officer for South Asia at CSW, at ben@csw.org.uk or visit our website at www.csw.org.uk